Road funds don't follow population in N.C.

BY MARK JOHNSON AND BRUCE SICELOFF - STAFF WRITERS

Raleigh drivers think they and their city are getting ripped off.

And they're right. Sort of.

Raleigh commuters routinely idle in traffic snarls such as the Interstate 40 bottleneck in and out of Research Triangle Park. They believe that local taxpayers shovel millions of dollars into the state Department of Transportation and get squat in return, especially when it comes to asphalt and yellow stripes.

Wake is the state's second-most populous county, and second only to Mecklenburg in state spending for road maintenance and construction.

But when spending shares are counted on a per-capita basis, according to DOT and census data analyzed by The News & Observer, Wake ranks 90th out of North Carolina's 100 counties.

DOT spent an average $3,756 for each North Carolinian during the past 10 years, but only $2,959 per person in Wake. That statewide average would have boosted Wake's share of DOT money since 2000 by 27 percent, or $715 million.

IBM manager Bruce Morris' commute from his home near Apex into Research Triangle Park can last 40 to 90 minutes, depending on how clogged I-40 gets each day.

"If I'm on brake lights by Aviation Parkway, it's going to take me forever," Morris said.

He has a secret, until now, strategy for coping with the daily jam. He stays in the right-hand lanes leading up to the Harrison Avenue exit. It's an uphill climb, which slows down the trucks in the left lanes.

The magic point is just before the exit and the crest of the hill. Before I-40 starts downhill and the trucks speed up, Morris slips into the left lanes ahead of them.

Next week, a legislative transportation committee will hold a public hearing on whether the state should update its 21-year-old "equity formula" for dividing most road construction money.

A consensus for overhaul seems to be building among urban lawmakers. Rural leaders rebuffed such efforts in the past. But the tide could turn when legislative districts are redrawn after this year's census to reflect a surge in urban growth since 2000.

DOT officials say transportation spending is not about matching dollars with head counts. It's about building a network that can move people and goods across the state.

Businesses might be less interested in moving to North Carolina if they can't get their goods from the Wilmington ports to Raleigh stores, regardless of traffic conditions on the I-40 Beltline, said Greer Beaty, DOT communications director.

"The benefits don't stop at the county line," Beaty said. "Our role at DOT is to maintain and enhance the system for the entire state. ... What's good for I-85 in Mecklenburg County is good for I-85 in Durham County. Those are major commercial routes."

Raleigh's 540 Outer Loop is a major route, too. But DOT said a few years ago that it would not have enough money to finish building it in the next three decades.

So local drivers will pay tolls to use the next 540 extension when the N.C. Turnpike Authority opens the state's first modern toll road, the Triangle Expressway. Meanwhile, Raleigh also is spending 7 percent of city property taxes to improve roads that are supposed to be the state's responsibility.

Wake isn't getting its fair share because the equity formula reserves too much money for rural areas, Raleigh Mayor Charles Meeker says.

"There are no thoroughfare projects being undertaken by DOT in Wake County, and there are none planned," Meeker said. "Road projects need to be built for roads that are used a lot."

Charlotte leaders have argued for years that the state's system of paying for roads shortchanges their city.

"The number one complaint we hear from citizens is congestion," said Rep. Becky Carney, a Charlotte Democrat and House Transportation Committee chairwoman. "Why aren't we addressing that?"

Four lanes, 10 miles

The equity formula was created in 1989, under then-Gov. Jim Martin, a Republican, with goals that included ensuring that nearly everyone in the state will live within 10 miles of a four-lane road.

Over the past decade, the county with the fewest people, Tyrrell, has received the most road money per capita. Tyrrell, in Eastern North Carolina, had a population of 4,078 in 2009 and is best known as the last county that Outer Banks-bound travelers pass through before they get to Dare County's beaches.

Much of Tyrrell County's big share reflects the expansion of U.S. 64, said Van Argabright, a top project manager at DOT. That project mostly benefits other counties, he said.

"The primary reason you do that is to get people from Raleigh to the Outer Banks," Arga bright said.

Legislators and governors from both parties have used road building as a lure for economic development.

But Rep. Ric Killian, a Charlotte Republican, said spreading economic development is not state government's job. The state should provide citizens with security and a sound infrastructure, he said.

"Businesses want to come to an area where employees can buy a house, send their kids to a good school and enjoy the amenities of the community," he said. "That usually means urban areas, and that won't change."

David Hartgen, a retired UNC Charlotte transportation professor, faults both state and city leaders for failing to focus spending priorities on projects that will relieve congestion.

Raleigh and Charlotte planners have earmarked too much of their money for big transit investments that will serve only 1 to 2 percent of their residents, he said.

"The problem is the misallocation of the money we have," Hartgen said."

Sen. Clark Jenkins, an Edgecombe County Democrat, doesn't want to see money taken from rural areas. But he agrees that DOT needs to find new money to reduce congestion in cities.

"The bottom line is we need more money," said Jenkins, vice-chairman of the Senate Transportation Committee. "And it should go into the congested areas."

mjohnson@charlotteobserver.com or 919-829-4774
Read more: http://www.newsobserver.com/2010/03/29/411805/road-funds-dont-follow-population.html?storylink=misearch#ixzz0jb8Fpg3h